My reverence, Protarchus, for the names of the gods is profound. [Philebus 12C, cited twice by Origen (Contra Celsum 1:25, 4:48)]

Modern scholars of religion have tended to look askance at ideas about divine names which diverge from their own “words are names for objects” (referential) model of language. Working from their own ideas about how words should be used, scholars classify nonreferential uses of language in a descending scale of aesthetics, from mystical to theurgic down to magical. Favoring referential theories over nonreferential theories helps define and simultaneously favor, in the religious spectrum, mystics over magicians, thinkers over doers, and even Christians over Jews.

A good place to start unpacking these partisan emphases is with the writings of two Christian theologians, Origen and Pseudo-Dionysius.¹ These writers are particularly helpful because their explanations of divine names include explicit examples of nonreferential uses of words. Origen’s discussion of divine names interests us because his theory of

¹ The exact identity of Pseudo-Dionysius is still not known, and may never be; the general consensus is that he lived in the early fifth century. For a recent English translation of the corpus and a biography see Colm Luibheid, Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works (New York: Paulist, 1987). Some comments about this translation will be made below.
the inherent power of divine names looks, at first glance, like pure magic. Pseudo-Dionysius's writings are viewed as definitive of the true Christian mystical experience, and his language epitomizes, for modern scholars, mystical language.² His ideas about divine names are more familiar to us and appear to abandon the manipulative ideas of Origen. However, if we leave our aesthetic criteria aside, we will find that each author has a distinct theory about the relationship between words and objects, a theory which includes nonreferential use of divine names. As we will see, for Origen the names of God are, at least in Hebrew, powerful, automatic manifestations of divine power. Pseudo-Dionysius calls divine names "statues": a very distinct means of explaining how divine names represent the deity on earth. For both writers, divine names are not completely arbitrary, and words can be used in ritual transformations.

ORIGEN'S THEORIES OF DIVINE NAMES

It is in Contra Celsum (CC) that Origen explicitly broaches the topic of language and of names in particular.³ He mentions and rejects some of the standard philosophical options.⁴ He criticizes first Aristotle's theory of the "arbitrary determination" of the meaning of words, then the Stoic theory of "first utterances being imitations of the things described and becoming their names," and finally Epicurus's argument that "the first men having burst out with certain sounds descriptive of the objects," these sounds became names (CC 1:24).

Origen rejects Aristotle's fiercely representational theory.⁵ In Origen's theory of effective language, divine names do not "represent"; they manifest divine power. He could not embrace the Stoic theories,

⁴ Origen also argues against a theory of "arbitrary convention" for names in Exhortation to Martyrdom 46 (hereinafter cited as Ex. Mart.).
⁵ "For Aristotle (De Interpretatione 16.1) mental experiences are direct images of things all men experience uniformly, while spoken words are variable symbols of these universal images" (Richard J. Parmentier, "Semiotic Mediation: Ancestral Genealogy and Final Interpretant," in Semiotic Mediation, ed. R. Parmentier and E. Mertz [Orlando, Fla.: Academic Press, 1985], pp. 359–85, quote on p. 360).
though initially their materialistic bent might seem closer to his. Their ideas about the way words are "imitations" of objects does not stress the divine origin of language. The rival Epicurean argument of social conventions based on emotional reactions to objects must have seemed ludicrous and outrageous to Origen.

The special power of names makes Origen hesitant even to discuss the issue. Names point to the deepest meanings of objects signifying their nature. A name is a "summing up denomination which gives the real essence (character) of the named object" (On Prayer 24.2 [GCS 3.353]). The nature of names, he writes, "is a profound and obscure question" as well as "a certain, mysterious divine science." Indeed, it is a "consistent system which has principles known to a very few" (CC 1:25).

Despite his concerns, he does discuss this esoteric topic in order to answer his opponent Celsus's contention that Christians resort to magic. Origen's answer to this charge is that Celsus fails to understand the true philosophy of names. Language is not of human origin, and names are not arbitrary. Using Jesus' names to heal is not magic but a practice attested to by Jesus himself. "For they [Christians] do not get 'the power which they seem to possess' by any incantations, but by the name of Jesus, with the recital of the histories about him. . . . Jesus taught this when he said: 'Many shall say to me in that day, "In thy name we have cast out daimons and performed miracles"'" (Matt. 7:22, in CC 1:6).

Origen finds proof of the nonarbitrariness of names in the success individuals have in summoning supernatural forces—why else do they respond to humans? Angel names, for example, are based on the activities which God gave them to do and which they may fulfill for humans (CC 1:25). Origen differentiates this very carefully from magic, arguing, for example, that Moses used a rod and a verbal formula (logos) so that he would not be suspected of magic, which would involve only a rod (Selections on Exodus, in PG 12.284B).

Origen cites Plato's reverence for the names of gods when he argues against Celsus's idea that it does not matter which name is used to refer to the deity, another example for Origen of Celsus's misunderstanding.

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6 Origen discusses the significance of names in Selections on Genesis 17:5 (PG 12.116); Homilies on Numbers (NumHom) 25.3 (GCS 7.235); NumHom 27.5 (GCS 7.262); NumHom 27.13 (GCS 7.279); Homilies on Joshua (JoshHom) 13.2 (GCS 7.372); JoshHom 13.4 (GCS 7.445); Homilies on John 6.40-41 (GCS 4.150) (the careful examination of names is important); and deOrat 24.2. Compare n. 4 above.

7 Compare On First Principles 1.8.1; JoshHom 23.4; NumHom 14.2. For Jewish sources, see Midrash Rabbah, Naso 10.5 (on Judg. 13:18), where an angel replies to a request for his name, "I am not able to tell you my name for the Holy One, Blessed be He, gives us a name to accord with the errand on which he sends us."

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of name philosophy. Here Celsus articulates a common idea, a form of “linguistic monotheism”: all the different divine names refer to the same deity. However, for Origen this argument was planted by daemons, who “attribute their own names to the supreme God so that they may be worshiped as the supreme God” (Ex. Mart. 46).

On the question of which names are efficacious, Origen casts a wide net, including names of all kinds of divine beings. “Jesus,” of course, is an efficacious and divine name (CC 1:67). Scriptural (Hebrew) names have power, with the name “God of Abraham” mentioned in particular. Names of patriarchs represent yet another subset of divine beings, with Abraham said to be related to the deity (CC 1:22). All the patriarchs are referred to as “angels,” each with a divine character (CC 4:34). The name “Sabaoth” derives its meaning from the divine beings, the Sabai, with “sabaoth” being their ruler. Origen also uses Eph. 1:21 to argue that there are other divine beings whose names are not known. Christians, among others, can achieve special powers by employing all these names, including the names of daemons.

The power of a divine name is automatic and not based on the intention of the speaker. Thus, for Origen, a Christian must be careful not to speak the names of other heavenly powers, for the power would still be, as it were, turned on (CC 1:25, 4:48). A Christian would rather face death then utter the word “Zeus,” an utterance which, whether he meant it or not, might produce miracles (CC 4:33-34). While Zeus may not be god, he might be a powerful daemon and therefore an active threat.

8 See CC 5:41, 8:69. The themes that God is nameless and/or that all names refer to the same god are used to make a variety of theological points. For a sample of such uses, see Pseudo-Aristotle de Mundo 7; Philo Life of Moses 1:75 (no name properly used of me); On Abraham 51 (God needs no name); Josephus Against Apion 2:167; Justin 1 Apology 61.11 (anyone who dares to say there is a name raves), 63.1 (no one can utter name of ineffable god), 2 Apology 6.1 (no name given); Clement Stromateis 5.82.1; Maximus of Tyre Oration 2:10 (we rely on names for the nameless); Corpus Hermeticum 5.1 (He who is too great to be called God). The Martyrdom of Isaiah 1:7 states that God's name was not sent into the world. Along with having no statues, the cult in Jerusalem worshiped a nameless or unknown god (Dio Cassius Roman History 1,37).

9 For the patriarchs as angels, see also Justin Dialogue 85,2,3.

10 Commentary on John 1.31 (GCS 4.38).

11 Ibid.

12 CC 1:6, cf. 6:40, 8:37; JoshHom 21.

13 The automatic dimension of names is one of the most bewildering aspects of these ideas. There is, e.g., no distinction between “use” and “mention” as outlined by John Lyons in Semantics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1:5–10. All “performative” language has its automatic qualities, i.e., conditions under which it is operative; this is just a particularly distinct example.

14 For similar Christian prohibitions against uttering divine names, see Tertullian's discussion in On Idolatry, chaps. 20–21, and Didascalia Apostolorum 21.
in this regard, concerned with the inherent and automatic power of divine names.\textsuperscript{15} Moses knew enough about these "secret doctrines" to prohibit mentioning the names of gods, according to Origen's reading of Ex. 23:13 (CC 1:26).

Part of the power Scripture has over humans, and its ability to influence them toward good and away from evil, is due to the automatically effective names it includes. In his Homilies on Joshua, Origen states that "more powerful than any incantation is the naming of names" (20,1).\textsuperscript{16} Origen explains this power as follows:

That there are certain invisible forms within us, and indeed a multitude of them, is revealed to us by the psalm which says: Praise the Lord, my soul and let all the things within me praise his holy name (102,1). So there are a multitude of powers within us which have been assigned to our souls and bodies, which, if they are whole, when the Holy Scripture is read, are benefitted and become stronger, even if "our mind is unfruitful," as it is written about "him who speaks with tongues" (1 Cor. 14:14), "My spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful."

The nonarbitrariness of language for Origen is connected with the special qualities of Hebrew, which is for him the original language.\textsuperscript{17} Names, and the prayers which contain them, lose their efficacy in translation. For example, the phrase "God of Abraham" uttered as "God of the chosen father of the echo" will not work (CC 1:25). As Origen explains, "in this case the recitation would have no effect, as it would be no different from the names which have no power at all" (CC 5:45). The words must be said in Hebrew or they will be "weak and ineffective" (CC 1:25).\textsuperscript{18} Because of the problems translation presents, Origen decides it must not be the "signification" of the name which gives it power but instead it must be "the qualities and characteristics of the sounds" (CC 1:25).\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15} Jewish exegetes interpreted scriptural prohibitions against taking the deity's name in vain as general prohibitions against uttering divine names. This was only a small part of their elaborate ideology about divine names. See<b>Sanhedrin 63b, Mekila</b> on Ex. 23:13 and <i>Avodah Zara</i> 6,2.


\textsuperscript{17} Adam spoke Hebrew, the original language (in NumHom 11.4 [GCS 7.84]).

\textsuperscript{18} Compare CC 5:45, 8:37.

\textsuperscript{19} Chadwick (n. 3 above), and Dillon, pp. 203–16, connect Origen's remarks about translation with similar prohibitions, such as those found in Iamblichus (<i>On the Mysteries</i> 7,5) and the Chaldaean Oracles (58). For Chadwick, see his note on CC 1:25. Dillon cites <i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> Tractate 16, which states that the "overdecorative language of the Greeks renders ineffective the awesome strength and powerful phraseology of the words." Neither Chadwick nor Dillon considers possible Jewish influences
Origen's particular amalgam of ideas about names is influenced, as he states, by the ideas of Hebrew name interpreters. For example, he states that there are ten names for God (*Selections on Psalms* 2, in *PG* 12.1104) and attributes the interpretation of these and other names to "Hebrews" in his commentary on the Song of Songs (*Homilies on the Song of Songs* 1.6 [*GCS* 8.38.2]) and in *CC* 4:34. As Nicholas de Lange has pointed out, the term "doresh shemoth/interpreter of names" attributed to Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Joshua ben Qorlah (*Ruth Rabba* 2.5 and *Gen. Rabba* 42.5) is similar to Origen's term "interpretes nominum."

What were the Hebrews doing when they interpreted names? Few interpreters can resist unraveling hidden meanings in names, finding, for example, etymological meanings. As to divine names, the exegetes believed that there was one most secret, most powerful divine name which, because of its automatic efficacy, could only be referred to by using its name, "The interpretable Name (Shem Ha-Meforash)." To backtrack for a moment, according to Genesis, God created the world through speech. This is the primary model with which the Hebrew exegetes worked as they developed their system of ritual or efficacious speech. According to a variety of exegetical texts, in creating the world God did not say, "Let there be light," but instead spoke his name. In this new view, the relation between efficacious speech and the deed on this aspect of Origen's thought. There are many possible modes for explaining "untranslatability," just as there are many uses to which the trope of the deity's namelessness can be put.


De Lange, p. 118.

Because they are constructing an idea about the most hidden Name, there is no simple answer to the often asked, but misguided, question: Which name were they referring to? To give a simple answer (It was name X, e.g.) would not only be silly but would destroy the system. For more discussion of the Shem Ha-Meforash, see Naomi Janowitz, "Recreating Genesis: The Metapragmatics of Divine Speech," in *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*, ed. J. Lucy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

For a longer discussion of this, see Naomi Janowitz, *The Poetics of Ascent* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989).
effected has changed as well as the explanation for the word’s efficacy. The word God spoke was a manifestation of himself and therefore manifested his power. Again, God’s name is powerful because it is natural and not conventional; a natural divine name is inherently more than natural, even “supernatural.”

The Name then becomes the center of the ritual system, because it is the effective word par excellence. Pronouncing it is prohibited, as is to be expected, because of its inherent and automatic power. By learning the Name and, in particular, learning to combine the sounds of the letters in the same formation God used when creating the world, it becomes possible to do a variety of ritual tasks. The divine name, uttered in a variety of permutations, is used, for example, as a means of achieving ascent through the heavens.

Origen’s major problem was that the Hebrew name interpreters elevated the Hebrew language as the natural language, whereas he dealt with Greek scriptures. He was aware that it was the very sounds of the name (i.e., Hebrew sounds) which are effective, but he misses the point when he posits that the name does not work based on its signification. In the system of the rabbis, it does, but that signification functions even at the level of sounds, which to Origen do not “signify.” For the exegetes divine names cannot be translated, but not because of their lack of signification. If anything, it is the opposite: even the sounds signify the name. The signification of name and sound are both dependent on the Hebrew.

Unlike Hebrew exegetes, who locate performative force in the divine name and its derivatives, Christians locate it in the Word. Origen states in his commentary on John, “Because he regards Him as the Creator of all things, he gives Him the name of ‘the word.’” Origen can turn with delight to the prologue of John, which self-consciously reflects on the creation-through-speech story in Genesis, and state that the medium is the message.

**PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AND DIVINE NAMES AS STATUES**

If Origen has a nonreferential theory of divine names, Pseudo-Dionysius has a modified-referential theory. His theory is closer to our

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25 The nonsense words have the signification, and hence the efficacy, of the divine name.

26 Compare Dillon’s discussion of sense and reference, p. 214.

27 Bernard Darrell Jackson notes that he found only one example prior to Augustine in which “sign” in the New Testament is interpreted as referring to a linguistic entity and not, e.g., a star. This one example is found in Origen’s *Commentary on John* 10.24.6 (GCS 4.196), where he states that Jesus’ words, “Take these things hence,” are a sign (“The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine’s De Doctrina Christiana,” in *Augustine*, ed. R. A. Markus [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972], pp. 92–148, quote on p. 116). Also see the comments on Augustine in Janowitz, “Recreating Genesis.”
ideas about language and therefore he looks less "magical." The special role of Hebrew is gone and, most important, divine names "stand for" the deity. This particular "standing for" was of tremendous interest to Pseudo-Dionysius. The question for him, How do names stand for god? was as complicated as the manner in which the material world reflects the transcendent deity.

Divine names were obviously important for Pseudo-Dionysius, since he wrote a lengthy treatise, Divine Names (DN). He started this treatise with an ironic comment about his ability to reach his goal through a discussion of the divine names. The "utterly transcendent," which he was seeking, "is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name" (DN 1:1). The same point occurs later in the treatise where he cited the famous story from Judg. 13:18 where an angel, asked his name, rebukes the questioner with, "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?" (DN 1:6). For the Hebrew exegetes, the root of "wonderful" (PRS) is the same root they use to construct a "name-for-the-name." Their understanding of the rebuke is: Do not ask my name because it is too powerful, too secret to tell you. For Pseudo-Dionysius, the rebuke is: God does not really have a name. "Theologians praise it by every name—and as the Nameless One" (DN 1:6). God's name is above every name to such an extent that he is in truth "nameless."

If this is true, why write an entire treatise called Divine Names? Pseudo-Dionysius wrote systematically, and in each of his four extant treatises he attacked a distinct philosophical issue. Each treatise examines a different layer of the standard late antique multilayered cosmology. As I. P. Sheldon-Williams notes, in the treatise The Most Mysterious Theology Pseudo-Dionysius deals with God as transcendent; in the Celestial Hierarchy and the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, he deals with the heavenly and earthly orders. In Divine Names, he writes about "God as First Cause." A major problem in this cosmology is how to conceive of the relationship between the highest level, the "utterly transcendent," and the lowest level, the world of matter. In what we could call an "emanationist" theory of language, the answer to this problem is supplied by the model of divine names. The divine names articulate the specific relationship between the power levels.

28 See Janowitz, "Recreating Genesis."
30 The title of this treatise is often translated as Mystical Theology, but I prefer the more literal translation, as will be argued below.
31 Sheldon-Williams, p. 68.
(physical sounds/world) and the highest deity (what the sounds represent).

In this system of cosmic emanations, God may be nameless but divine names are not arbitrary or meaningless. The treatise explains the meaning of each of the deity's names, starting with Good, Light, etc. Each name, as he now demonstrates at great length, is a minitext that reveals the deity's relationship to the world and explains his nature. Each name helps the inhabitants of the world to understand the deity. In fact, for Pseudo-Dionysius, exegesis of the revealed names, combined with the cosmological picture developed in the other treatises, is enough to understand the entire world, from the far-off God to the lowest part of matter.

The linguistic unit "name" offers a particularly rich exegetical opportunity for him to use in spinning out his emanationist theory. Each individual has the feeling that somehow his or her name is particularly closely related to him or her. At the same time we know we are not our names, and readily laugh at anyone who thinks that.

Again, it is this very specific linguistic role of "name" which he exploits. God's names have content (e.g., the name "Good") but they have primarily reference: that is, they refer to the deity named. It is this dual reference/content that excites and pleases Pseudo-Dionysius. God is not his name, and anyone who confuses his name with him is obviously misguided (magical). But God in fact is his name; each one is a manifestation, a revelation, a representation of the higher levels now present on earth.

As we read through Pseudo-Dionysius's treatise, which explains one name after another, we must grasp not the particular content of each name he discusses but instead the connection between divine name and divinity named. The most idiosyncratic description which concretizes this point is Pseudo-Dionysius's statement that divine names are "statues." At the start of chapter 9 he writes, "Greatness and smallness, sameness and difference, similarity and dissimilarity, rest and motion—we must examine also all that is manifested to us from these statues that are divine names" (DN 9:1). The exact phrase is found scattered throughout the writings of Proclus and so we now turn to him for an explanation.

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32 Luibheid translates this phrase "divinely named images" ([n. 1 above], p. 115).
33 Pseudo-Dionysius's use of this phrase is only one of the many connections between these two writers. H. D. Saffrey ("New Objective Links between the Pseudo-Dionysius and Proclus," in Neoplatonism and Christian Thought, ed. D. O'Meara [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982]) argues that Proclus may not have invented the phrase. Its absence in Iamblichus and Julian points to the early fifth-century Athens
Proclus's theory of divine names was, of course, part of his general theory of language. Language, while it is essentially human, is not based on chance; names conform to nature (In Crat 16, p. 5). More generally, names manifest the essences of things. This is because there is "a certain unity" between naming and intellectual knowledge, with beings higher up on the scale having greater capacity for both. Humans can demonstrate their divine knowledge when they give names to objects; naming is participation in divine power (In Crat 42, p. 13, 19–27). "There are many grades of names, as of knowledge. . . . And some are names we too can utter, others are unutterable. In short, as the Cratylus has taught us and before it divinely inspired tradition, both knowledge and name-giving among the gods transcends ours" (In Parm p. 853, 1–3).

Proclus distinguishes between three types of signs which the deity projects into the cosmos. The first are ineffable. The second are intermediary, "sometimes distinct, sometimes indistinct," and are used by theurgists. The third are divine names which are also used in ritual, as, for example, in hymns.

Proclus describes divine names as "statues" in three distinct comments, and it is worthwhile to quote his explanation of this idea at length.

Just as the demiurgic intellect brings into existence in matter the appearances of the very first Forms it contains in itself, produces temporal images of eternal beings, divisible images of indivisible beings, and from beings which are really beings produces images which have the consistency of shadow, in the same way, I think, our scientific knowledge also, which takes as its model the

when Plutarch of Athens and Syrianus were teaching there. He points out that this is the same period when the statues of gods were being removed from temples. "It is then only to the Platonists of the generations of Syrianus and of Proclus that one must attribute this devotion to the divine names as having taken the place of devotion to the statues of the gods" (p. 70). It is also possible that by defining them as divine names they hoped to give a new articulation as to the role of statues for internal consumption. Proclus editions cited are Commentary on Cratylus, ed. G. Pasquali (Leipzig: Teubner, 1908) (In Crat); Platonic Theology, ed. H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink (Paris: Budé, 1968–); and Commentary on Parmenides, ed. Victor Cousin (Paris, 1864) (In Parm).


"It is these names which theurgy expresses in imitating them by exclamations, sometimes distinct, sometimes indistinct" (In Crat 71, p. 31). Dillon writes, "Theurgy teaches us how to represent the structure of the symbola in the physical world by means of inarticulate utterances" ([n. 16 above], p. 209).
productive activity of the Intellect, makes by means of discourse similitudes of all the other realities and particularly of the gods themselves: . . . Since then it produces the names in that way, our scientific knowledge presents them in this ultimate degree as images of divine beings; in fact it produces each name as a statue of the gods, and just as theurgy invoked the generous goodness of the gods with a view to the illumination of statues artificially constructed, so also intellective knowledge related to divine beings, by composition and divisions of articulated sounds, reveals the hidden being of the gods. [Platonic Theology, bk. 1, chap. 29, pp. 123–24]

The “articulated sounds” of the divine names reveal to individuals something about the deity named, expressing hidden messages about the utterly transcendent. In his second use of “statues” Proclus writes that just as the human soul makes statues of the gods, so too “it produces out of itself, and with the help of verbal representations, the substance of the names . . . bringing into existence names like statues of the realities” (In Crat 51, 18.27–19.17).38 Finally, he calls names “rational statues of the realities” in his Commentary on Parmenides (In Parm p. 851, 8–10).

As H. D. Saffrey comments, “Language in composing the names of the gods expresses their nature and makes them present intellectually.”39 A person can pass through language, beyond thought, to unite with the divine by means of the use of a special type of language, the language of possession and enthusiasm.40

Pseudo-Dionysius shares not only Proclus’s extremely distinctive “names are statues” definition but also employs the same term, “theurgy.” Colm Luibheid translates the term as “God’s works,” a switch from objective to subjective genitive also made by Paul Rorem in an attempt to protect Pseudo-Dionysius from theurgistic taint (Luibheid, p. 52, n. 11). However, Pseudo-Dionysius repeatedly states that the Christian rituals “divinize,” showing that the object of the rite is the transformation of the symbols and the participant, and it is not simply a reference to works of God.41

It is not surprising that the eucharist is described as “theurgy.” In one of his letters Pseudo-Dionysius writes that Jesus passed on not only parables but also “the mysterious rites of deity manipulation

38 Proclus also calls names “rational states of the realities” in his commentary on Parmenides.
39 Saffrey, p. 67.
40 Trouillard, p. 243; Commentary on Republic 1, p. 80,11; 81,14, Kroll.
41 Pseudo-Dionysius writes about the hierarch that “sacred deification occurs in him directly from God,” Ecclesiastical History 2.
(theurgia) through the symbolism of a table" (Letters 9.1.1108A). Pseudo-Dionysius is able through this rite to manifest heavenly workings on earth, to connect the many layers of the cosmos, and to demonstrate the uppermost secrets in the earthly “symbols” of the bread and wine by their transformation.

The bread and wine are representations of divine power in the same way that divine names are “statues,” though the manifestation of heavenly workings in the eucharist is more dramatic and more directly efficacious than that of divine names. Even the teachings of the saints are called “theurgic lights,” also revealing divine power on earth for individuals who can read the teachings correctly.

Translation is not a problem for either Proclus or Pseudo-Dionysius. Proclus states that the divine names of the Egyptians, Chaldaeans, Indians, and the Greeks all have their own efficacy. The “grounding” of effective language is based on the universal relation of divinity to world, which has an international ontology and transcends any particular language.

PEIRCE’S ANALYSIS APPLIED TO DIVINE NAMES

Origen’s ideas about names could simply be dismissed as examples of the magical use of names; there would be nothing left to explain except the means by which religious thinkers were tainted by magical ideas. This is the approach taken, for example, in John Dillon’s otherwise exemplary article on Origen. In discussing Origen’s ideas, Dillon turns to “heterodox” texts for parallels, citing the use of names in the Greek Magical Papyri, Nag Hamadi texts, and Corpus Hermeticum. However, the flurry of debate about magic in the past few decades, if it has taught us anything, has shown consistently that older dichotomies (compulsion versus request, etc.) are useful neither in describing native ideas about magic and religion nor in forming the basis of scholarly distinctions. More closely related to the topic of this article, many religious rituals depend for their transformational capacity on the “performative” power of divine names. Nothing is gained, however, by

42 Luibheid translates this as “mysteries of his divine activity” ([n. 1 above], p. 283). Saffrey, leaning heavily away from translations such as Luibheid’s, translates this as “the mysteries by which one is made a god” (p. 72). I think that this translation, dramatic as it is, obscures the goal of theurgy, which is to demonstrate on earth the operations of the upper realm. This is dramatic enough, since it is the ultimate earthly transformation.

43 DN 592B.

44 In Crat 71, p. 32. Proclus also writes here that the amount of power unleashed depends on the status of the being invoked, a point reminiscent of Origen.

45 Dillon states, “One of the basic presuppositions of magical practice, both in Greco-Roman antiquity and elsewhere, is that there is power in names, or to be more exact, in the magician’s knowledge of names” (p. 203).
simply substituting “performativ” for the earlier word “magic.” A more precise vocabulary for discussing the transformational capacity of divine names and for differentiating between Origen’s and Pseudo-Dionysius’s notions is found in Charles Peirce’s analysis of signs. The Peircean term for Origen’s conception of divine name is “iconic.” He defines an icon as “a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though the object had no existence; such as a lead pencil streak in representing a geometrical line.” If we think about the example of the line, its form is important, indeed, crucial, to its function as a sign. In similar fashion, when a divine name is seen as being iconic, its form is important, that is, the very arrangement of the letters, their shapes, their sounds, etc.

The term “icon” articulates the late antique understanding that divine names are not arbitrary words used to refer to gods but that they actually embody—in their shape, the patterns of the sounds—the deity’s power. The term “icon” helps us delineate many issues which emerge in the Jewish circles known to Origen, such as the need to preserve the shape exactly, the “obsessive” quality with which it is copied, and the special treatment afforded to the scrolls which contain it.

Since the Hebrew name interpreters worked in Hebrew, translation was not a major issue. The iconic aspects of the name were lost in translation, albeit the fetishization of the name was known to have reverberations even at the level of translated names. For Origen, who had one foot in the world of Hebrew and one in the world of Greek, translation was a problem. Indeed, other early Christian writers articulated their own theories of performativity which were based on the Greek language.

Proclus’s theory (and Pseudo-Dionysius’s) is best described as symbolic and not iconic. According to Peirce, “a symbol is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant. Such is any utterance of speech which signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification.” From a symbolic view, iconic theories of names look magical.

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46 For a relevant discussion of Peirce’s sign system, see Richard Parmentier, “Signs’ Place Is Medias Res: Peirce’s Concept of Semiotic Mediation,” in Parmentier and Mertz, eds. (n. 5 above), pp. 23–48.

47 The term “icon” is taken from Peirce’s theory of signs (Philosophical Writings of Peirce [New York: Dover, 1955]).

48 Ibid., p. 104.

49 Ibid., p. 114. A symbol is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant. Such is any utterance of speech which signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification. Peirce also writes, “You can write down the word ‘star,’ but that does not make you the creator of the word, nor if you erase it have you destroyed the word” (ibid.).
and lowbrow. If Pseudo-Dionysius does not explicitly label Origen’s strange-sounding Hebrew names with their innate power as “magical,” someone with his point of view will sooner (Celsus) or later (Dillon) make that exact assessment. Pseudo-Dionysius will mockingly state, “Is it wrong to call twice times two four?” At the same time Pseudo-Dionysius will argue that names are specific manifestations of divine power on earth and that language has a role in “theurgy.” He would, for example, never say that the hierarch can say whatever he wants during communion. Pseudo-Dionysius is still a “doer.” By explaining to us his theory of names and his most secret theology, he teaches us a model for manipulating and transforming earthly elements to reveal divine ones, more familiar to us, perhaps, than Origen’s, but not less transformational.

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50 Pseudo-Dionysius employs this argument to support his exegesis (DN 4:11). The “meaning” of the text can be “represented” by either the text or its exegesis.